

THE EARLIEST
Highland Catholic Mission
IN NOVA SCOTIA:
A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE DEDICATION OF THE

CHURCH OF ST. MARGARET'S, ARISAIG,

JULY 15th, 1878.

By Rev. R. Macdonald P. P., Pictou.

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“ Their posterity are a holy inheritance ; and their seed hath stood in the covenants ; and their children for their sakes remain forever ; their seed and their glory shall not be forsaken. Their bodies are buried in peace ; and their name liveth unto generation and generation. Let the people show forth their wisdom, and the Church declare their praise.”



THESE words are recorded, by the Holy Ghost, in the forty fourth chapter of Ecclesiastics. They are beautifully expressive of the events, which cluster around, and gather into, the ceremony we have witnessed here this morning. The dedication of a Church in this old parish of St. Margaret's is a consummation of more than ordinary interest. For the devoted descendants of the Highlanders, who carried with them across the Western Ocean to these shores, the grand old faith of “ the dark attired Culdees, Albyn's earliest priests of God”—the faith which they and their forefathers had, during long years of trials and persecutions, so heroically preserved amid the wilds and fastnesses of their native glens, this day records a victory. “ This is the victory which overcometh the world, our faith.” “ Their children for their sakes remain forever. Their bodies are buried in peace ; and their name liveth unto generation and generation.”

Whatever of progress our holy religion has made, during the last ninety years, in this the eastern diocese of Nova Scotia, it must never be forgotten, that the good work had its beginning here. The fire of divine faith, which now—the glory be to God—gives no dim uncertain light in our midst, was first kindled at the fire which faintly flickered on the early rude altar of St. Margaret's.

This parish has a history of its own, which though not written is sacredly treasured up in the fond reminiscences of the few—the now very few—of the earlier settlers, who yet hover above

the horizon of life. "Still they lingering haunt the greenest spot in memory's waste." It is not by any means a record of great events, or brilliant achievements, but one of single hearted, earnest, loving, and confiding faith, patiently struggling with, and in the end surmounting, all adverse circumstances—a faith which to us when we look back, appears all the more beautiful and heroic for the noble simplicity of the primitive manners and for the social and domestic virtues in which it found so strong an expression. This simple, unadorned narrative goes back not quite an hundred years. In 1787, the first Catholic Highlander, the pioneer of the faith, took up his solitary abode in the bosom of the "forest primeval," which then waved in unbroken grandeur on these shores. In the territory included by the boundaries of the diocese of Arichat, Catholics were at that period few and far between. In November 1783, the 82nd Regiment, which had a large contingent of Catholics from the Western Highlands, was disbanded at Halifax. None, however, of these had hitherto made their way thus far to the East. To those forlorn inhabitants of the forest in a strange land the consolations of their religion were first carried, as often they had been to others in similar circumstances, by the ubiquitous and irrepressible Irish Missionary—a character which perhaps had never before been more fully sustained, than it was in the present instance by the zealous Father Jones. This was an Irish Capuchin Friar, learned as he was pious. Protected by the toleration extended to him, by Edward, Duke of Kent, he publicly exercised the sacred ministry at Halifax unmolested, and held a Vicar Apostolic's jurisdiction over the extensive region laved by the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The country, it is true, had under the domination of France, an anterior period of Catholic history, dating as far back as 1604. Few of the colonists of that period had remained, and fewer were the prospects, from the same quarter, of future colonization. Louisburg had then for thirty years been in ruins. Its churches had been demolished, its convents dismantled, its priests and religious communities banished the country. Its existence belonged to the realm of the past, and its history had been written. In the graphic description of the historian breathes a sad tone of melancholy beauty. "Desolation," writes he, "now sits with a ghastly smile around the once formidable

bastions. All is silent as a grave, except when the loud reverberating ocean sends back its tremendous surges on the rocky beach. A solitary descendant of the heroic Gaul is seen wandering amid the ruins under which are deposited the remains of his gallant ancestors, who there fought, and bled, and died, to prevent the noble fortress of his sovereign from falling prostrate under the prowess of the mightier Albion."

"On Louisburgh's heights, where the fisherman strays,
When the clear cold eve's declining;
He sees the war ships of other days
In the waves beneath him shining."

War had made a desert of a land reclaimed by a century and a half of toil. The work of man was no longer distinguishable from the solitude of nature. *Desertum faciunt, pacem appellant.* With the former settlers the Catholic religion was banished from Acadia, or at least, was confined to the poor dear faithful Micmac Indians. Thus had the fruits of the first victory of faith gone. Could they ever again be retrieved? Did the last hopes of Catholicity in this country expire when the arm of the French Monarch had become powerless to protect it? No! "Behold the hand of the Lord is not shortened." How mysterious are the ways in which He brings about the accomplishment of the wise designs of His all ruling providence. The invincible Highlanders, who on the memorable 25th of July, 1758, followed Wolfe to the conquest of the doomed city, were in the hands of God, the harbingers of a new, a more glorious, and a more enduring victory for our faith.

On the restoration of peace in 1763, the Highland regiments, as you well know, were disbanded, and offered by the Imperial Government free grants of lands in the most fertile portions of the Provinces, in which they had so gallantly served. But their predilections for their native straths and glens still chained them to the sweet homes of childhood. And who could find it in his heart to blame them? What son of the heather could of his free will exchange his own "loved green slopes of Lochaber," for the then unhospitable, unexplored wilds of America? Alas! the time at length came when the exchange was no longer a matter of choice, but of dire necessity. The heartless chieftain has discovered that the raising of cattle and sheep affords larger profits, than the letting of his lands to poor tenants, and forthwith he begins to eject them from the cozy cottages on the

mountain side where they, and their forefathers for centuries, had found shelter. This unpatriotic and inhuman policy was inaugurated in 1790. The year following saw the full tide of emigration rapidly ebb away from the "misty Isles," from the straths, glens, and mountains of Inverness, from Glengarry, Knoydart, Arisaig, Morar, and Strathglass. With the prudent forethought so characteristic of their race, those early exiles kept together. Wherever they went, they settled down in large groups. The first arrivals to this country colonized the parish of St. Margaret's.

And this, my friends, was the humble beginning of the second epoch of Catholicity in Eastern Nova Scotia. Hither the Highland Immigrants were soon followed by the first Highland priest, the Rev. James Macdonald, of Morar, and in 1792, their first church was built. I need scarcely tell you, that it could lay but little claim to the constructive beauties of the Gothic, or to the more ornamented magnificence of Classic architecture. It was a small and unpretentious log structure. It stood modestly back on the lonely beach in the neighborhood of the present pier. But although not very imposing looked the building, we can well imagine how fervent were the prayers, how earnest the faith with which they were uttered, and how strong the hope that inspired them. Devotion burst forth in gushing freshness, in thrilling tenderness, from the grateful hearts of those worshippers, when, for the first time on this side of the Atlantic, they knelt around that rustic altar to adore the God of their fathers.

On the departure of Father James in 1795, until the arrival of Father Alexander Macdonald in 1802, the good people of St. Margaret's depended for spiritual succour on the transient visits of the late saintly Bishop McEachern, of Prince Edward Island; and indeed, from the day of his arrival in America, in 1790, until the day of his death, the Highland Catholics, who had settled on the mainland were to him objects of scarcely less pastoral solicitude, than were those who were placed under his more immediate care. I shall not now attempt to describe how much power for good this holy priest held and exercised over his countrymen, or how cheerfully they in their turn yielded to him, without his exacting it, the ready submission which we find accorded only to those whom sanctity has invested with authority.

Much of the progress, which is made by all communities, in the earlier stages, is due to the energy of individual minds. The success of religion, in new countries, is often, under God, the result of faith in persons, or of personal attachments. These incentives were not long wanting to the Catholics of St. Margaret's. Father Alexander Macdonald united in himself all the rare qualities of head and heart, which were so eminently calculated not only to win and retain the confidence and affections of his compatriots, but also to shape the destinies of a new country, as ours then was, struggling in the first throes of civil, social, and religious organization. He was born in 1754, at Cleanoeg, Glenspean, in the Braes of Lochaber. He was ordained priest in his twenty-eighth year, and for twenty years subsequently served on the Scotch Missions. When he arrived at Arisaig, he was in the full vigor of manhood, and a priest and Highlander every inch. He was a man of commanding appearance, *facile princeps*, born to govern. Of a deeply sympathizing nature withal, his big heart seemed to have but two pulsations—one for his faith, the other for his countrymen. He was brave as he was disinterested. Obstacles, which to others were unsurmountable, bent pliantly before him. *Impiger ille jura sibi nata neget*. At his arrival, a brighter vista began to appear in the dawn. The dark horizon, which had hitherto circumscribed the wavering hopes of the settlers, was at once relieved of its gloom. He inspired them with his own manly courage, and cheered them on by the example of his great powers of endurance. Every thing seemed the better, and every heart the lighter, for his presence. Under his auspices their struggles for subsistence gradually became less arduous. The soil, the rivers, the sea, and the forests had from the beginning taken kindly to the new comers, and continuing in sympathy with their wants, supplied them from their stores. From the embarrassing circumstances in which on their arrival they found themselves placed, they began to emerge with a feeling of greater self-reliance. Persevering industry changed forest lands into smiling farms; and comparative ease and comfort took place of previous privations and toils. The words of the prophet were verified. "The land that was desolate and impassable shall be made glad. The wilderness shall flourish like the lily." To say that with their inbred love of freedom, our fathers were made glad in their altered circum-

stances and happy, is to assert no more than that they were sincere and virtuous Catholics. Happiness, my friends, does not inseparably attach itself to rank, or riches, much less to the luxury or fastidious refinements of fashion. True happiness is the price of virtue. Wherever virtue makes its abode, there happiness dwells, and, like the morning sun, sheds around it a golden flood of light, loveliness and beauty over the humblest homes. The simple joys, the warm affections, the kindly intercourse, the native charms, of those dear old homesteads, were marred by no selfish or sordid avarice. All were bound together by the strong ties of common interests, common hardships, and common dangers. Charity in its genuine simplicity was there, and amid the privations which are inseparable from the settlement of a new colony, found its readiest expression in the discharge of the various duties of hospitality. With them, hospitality was no mere name. Every log cabin was freely thrown open to all that might choose to share in the best cheer its humble inmates could afford. It was the chivalrous hospitality of their Catholic forefathers, which for the nonce made no distinction, allowed none to be made, between acquaintance and stranger, friend and foe.

“ He gave him of his Highland cheer
The hardened flesh of mountain deer,
Dry fuel on the fire he laid,
And bade the *Saxon* share his plaid.”

Intensely conservative as they certainly were of their national customs, language, and traditions, there was one thought which soared above all others, and ever occupied in their affections a higher sphere and holier, that namely of their religion. The faith of St. Ninian had for a thousand years taken possession of the national heart, moulded the national character, become a part of the intellectual life of the nation, and woven itself in limpid terseness into every fibre of their beautiful though unwritten Gaelic literature. Our fathers disdained in their honest, manly hearts to sacrifice one iota of that faith to craven worldly interests, because they knew that divest themselves of it they could not, without undoing all that was most chivalrous in their past history, truest in their nature, and most sacred in their best affections. For the love of Jesus and the Virgin Mother they reserved a place in the citadel of their hearts inaccessible to all

other love. When from their new homes in America, the message of their fidelity to Scotland's ancient faith was waited across the seas to the land that gave them birth, that message was worded in the language of St. Paul. "Thou hast fully known my doctrine, my faith, my long suffering, love, and patience. What shall separate us from the love of Christ, shall tribulation and distress, famine or nakedness, or danger, or persecution, or the sword? But all things we have overcome because of Him who hath loved us." Like the Hebrews, in their captivity, they preserved here their national hope, and sang the song of Zion to the God of Israel—a song, which to them, be it remembered, breathed its deepest pathos, its sweetest tenderness, only in the rugged numbers of Ossian. There was no sacrifice too great, no labor too arduous, to be undertaken for the honor and maintenance of their religion. Every degree of improvement in their worldly comforts marked a corresponding desire to enhance their spiritual welfare, and in every enterprise they were guided to a successful issue by the clear unerring instinct of a single hearted and resolute faith. In 1808, their second church, which stood on the site of the present one, was begun. The building was forty feet by twenty-six originally, but it was subsequently enlarged.

The three thousand miles of ocean which now separated them from the homes, did not divide them from the Church, of their fathers. With the untutored aborigines as co-religionists, they found themselves immediately on their arrival within the pale of, and in close communion with, a Church which being Catholic is every where. With it they were united, not merely in the purity of Apostolic faith, but by the more visible ties of Apostolic succession. None knew better than they the value of obedience to their duly constituted spiritual guides, without which, even with all their faith and other virtues, they should remain an isolated community, and, like the branch lopped off the parent trunk, doomed eventually to wither and die. Nova Scotia formed a part of the diocese of Quebec at the date of its erection in 1574, by Pope Clement X.; consequently, the first confirmation which was administered at Arisaig, was by Mgr. Deneou, bishop of that ancient diocese, in 1803. Towards the close of 1817, Pius VII., of happy memory, separated Nova Scotia from Quebec by erecting the former into a Vicariate Apostolic. In the summer of 1818, the third confirmation was

administered here, by that successful missionary, erudite scholar, and energetic prelate, the Right Reverend Edmond Burke, Titular Bishop of Sion, and Vicar Apostolic of Nova Scotia. An intermediate confirmation was held in 1812, by the illustrious Archbishop Plessis of Quebec. At this date, he found Father Alexander, full of years and merits, the venerated pastor, I should say, the acknowledged patriarch, of six hundred and fifty Highland Catholic families. Of these, three hundred and fifty were on the mainland—the balance were on the island of Cape Breton. In 1815, there were three thousand Catholics in the Counties of Pictou and Antigonish.

On the 15th of April, 1816, an event occurred by which all these fair prospects were for a time greatly overcast—the good Father Alexander died at Halifax. A deep shadow of sorrow crossed the widowed hearts of St. Margaret's. A darker cloud never lowered on a hopeful community. The Governor, and Admiral on the Station, offered to send a man-of-war with the remains to Arisaig, but a gallant little band of Highlanders (only one of whom now survives) who had hastened to the capital on the first tidings of the death of their pastor, gratefully declined the proffered honor. He was their own dear priest; part with him in death they could not. Carrying his remains on their shoulders, they travelled homewards night and day, over all but impassable roads, forded rivers, through deep snows and dense forests, until they reverently laid them in their peaceful grave, on yonder hill, in the shadow of the altar at which in life he had so often offered the august mysteries for the living and the dead. *Dulces moriens reminiscitur Argos.*

With his death, the history of the parish closes its first quarter of a century. The great problem had been solved. The religious destiny of the country was forever decided. The land, which on his coming he found a fruitless and forbidding wilderness, he saw peopled with fervent souls. And victory, which had so long hung in the balance, fluctuating between hope and fear, returned once more to old Acadia to perch on the banners of the former church of the land. The vineyard, which he had planted with so much loving care, was watered by the successive labors of other missionaries not less zealous than himself; and God in His own good time gave the increase.

Father Alexander Macdonell of Strathglas, who, since his arrival in 1811, had been assistant priest at Arisaig, now suc-

ceeded to the charge of the parish, and continued to administer it with not less zeal than prudence, until his removal to Cape Breton, in the winter of 1818. Then, for a few months, the parish was attended by the Rev. William Chisholm, who resided at Antigonish. This holy priest, in the fall of 1818, died the death of an Apostle, the martyr of his zeal, while on a sick call at Cape George. He was succeeded by the Rev. Colin Grant, whose incumbency extended over a period of twelve years. So long as care for the sick and dying is one of the indispensable functions of the ministry, so long shall the name of Father Grant remain associated with all that is courageous and self-sacrificing in the life of the devoted priest. In the discharge of this duty, personal comfort was never once taken into account—nothing was to him an inconvenience, and no time unseasonable.

“Alike to him was time or tide,
December snow or July's pride,
Alike to him was tide or time,
Moonless midnight or matin prime.”

I shall not here dwell at length on the respective labors of the amiable and saintly Father Alexander McLeod, of the wise and fearless Father Ronald McGillivray, of the Rev. J. V. Macdonnell, or of Rev. Kenneth J. Macdonald; the two former have gone to receive their recompense from the Master of the vineyard; the two latter are yet laboring with their wonted zeal in other parishes of this diocese.

On the 31st October, 1830, your present revered pastor said his first Mass, as parish priest of St. Margaret's. Forty-eight long years have since come and gone. To him they were years of care, anxiety, and toil, that have changed the auburn locks of youth into hoary hairs, and left their indelible impress on his venerable brow. God has permitted him, as He permitted the aged Simeon, to outlive all the companions of early life, that his beautiful old age, like the mellow autumn of a rich and glorious summer, may now witness the triumphs of our faith in the land. For the Catholic cause, these have everywhere been most eventful years. Within that period, for the first time in three centuries, the strong hand of power was lifted off the prostrate Church of God. When the Saviour on Easter morning had risen in assured triumph from the momentary death to which His enemies had consigned Him, He exhibited in His

glorified body the deep wounds of the crucifixion. It was even thus with His Immaculate Spouse. She came forth from her ages of bondage "with her garments yet dripping in the blood of her children, but with the principle of life still strong within her." In her recuperative energy she spread herself, with the sudden ripeness of a northern summer, over countries, where she had hitherto been proscribed. The faith of our Highland forefathers, having passed through its period of difficulties, began to share in those prosperous results. Arisaig, Moidart and Knoydart, in the Mother country, had ever stood firm, and in the darkest hour of trial, clung, with the undying fidelity of the Celt, to the faith of St. Columba. "And their children for their sakes remain forever." The descendants of those sturdy Highlanders in the Dominion of Canada alone number over one hundred thousand devoted Catholics. But nowhere does the life of Catholicity throb more warmly or flow more vigorously than in this very parish of St. Margaret's, with its Arisaig, Moidart, and Knoydart. The faith is immovably settled here, firm as the very rocky ramparts, which nature has placed as sentinels on the coast, to keep forever at bay the advances of the tyrant ocean. That faith shall depart from these green hills and fertile valleys only when the name of the last Highlander shall be forgotten. For the proof of the religious life of this parish, I ask you to look not merely to the contrast between the first log church in which our forefathers assembled at divine worship, and this magnificent edifice on which your piety has lavished the rich and graceful decorations of art, and in which you have the happiness this morning to witness the sacred rites performed in all their solemn and imposing grandeur; the real proof is found in the number of priests—double that of the first college of Apostles—this parish has already given to the service of the altar. But enough. My task is finished. My sketch, though imperfect, has connected the dead of this parish with the living, the past with the present. The future is in your hands. It shall be, under God, what you will make it. That it may be worthy of so promising a beginning let me in conclusion admonish you in the words of Deuteronomy to "remember the days of old, and think of the generations which have passed away."

